

HEROES AT THE MASSACRE

twenty-five years later, the soldier who blew the whistle on my lai remembers a few good men

CURIOUS, isn't it, how the first thing you recall about someone you haven't seen in a long time is often the last thing you'd expect to remember?

That's how it was that night at Duc Pho in April 1968, when I ran into Butch Gruver, the only man I ever saw strain rubbing alcohol through a loaf of bread and drink it.

Gruver's bread-to-booze trick, performed during a break in jungle-warfare training in Hawaii, pretty much convinced the rest of us that he wasn't like the rest of us. There was something about him—a lazy, ratlike intensity—that made you pay attention to this hard little man. He said he'd done time in an Arkansas prison, and no one doubted it.

I believed him six months later, too, when we crossed trails on the edge of the road at Duc Pho, outside 11th Brigade Headquarters in Vietnam.

That was when I first heard about what happened at Pinkville, a place the world came to know as My Lai.

Gruver was in full Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol regalia that evening—tiger stripes, web belt and suspenders loaded with ammunition, a bulging, battle-ready rucksack with everything taped down for silent movement in the jungle. He was with four other guys, also LRRPs—lurps, as we called them. Lurps worked in small teams that got choppered into places where they'd hide out for a few days and watch the enemy. Gruver and his bunch were due to be dropped into the mountains west of us the next morning.

That night, after eating, Butch and I found an empty tent and sat down at a packing-crate table, hot beers in hand. By and by he said, "Hey, man, did you hear what we did at Pinkville?"

I'd heard the name. A month earlier I had been in a firefight as a helicopter door gunner near Pinkville, a collection of several hamlets about 20 miles north of Duc Pho. Pinkville got its name from the color used on Army maps to indicate population density. It was said to be the stomping grounds of a particularly fierce Viet Cong battalion.

"No, man," I said. "What did you do at Pinkville?"

His answer made me remember the question. One month earlier, Gruver said, he and the rest of Charlie Company went through Pinkville and killed everybody they saw—hundreds of men, women, children, babies. Slaughtered them with machine guns, rifles, pistols, grenades, bayonets. Raped the women, burned the houses. Killed the livestock.

One man who took part in the operation, a lieu-

tenant described by Gruver as "that dickhead Calley," seemed to have a special enthusiasm for the killing. He lined up villagers in groups for execution. Screamed at GIs and threatened to shoot anyone who refused to fire.

"Yeah," Gruver said as we sat in the tent. "A lot of people went pretty crazy that day."

I think I must have gone a little crazy myself that night, listening to his story. I knew it was true even as the words came out of Gruver's mouth, one ugly detail after another, and I knew it wasn't some kind of random, accidental act. Whatever happened at My Lai had to have been the direct result of official military policy. There was no doubt in my mind about that. Shit may have rolled downhill in Vietnam, but blood flowed up the chain of command.

I promised myself that I would pursue the story in the eight months I had left of my tour. The facts would be easy enough to check. Several buddies from jungle training in Hawaii had ended up serving with Gruver in Charlie Company. They wouldn't be hard to track down.

I hoped my friends weren't part of the killing. But if they were, well, they were. Whatever was true, was true. Nobody could change that. And I vowed to myself that I would not keep this secret.

We were supposed to be soldiers in the United States Army, not butchers of women and babies. We were not perfect, God knows, but, even left to our own vices—and we had our share—most of us were better than that. Indeed, some of the men who had been at My Lai that day, as I would discover, truly had been heroes.

My friend Billy, I was sad to learn, was not one of them.

We trained together in Hawaii, Billy and I. A few weeks after Gruver told me about My Lai, we all ended up in the same lurp unit, living in a camp on the beach at Chu Lai.

Just about everybody was smoking dope by then, but Billy, like a handful of guys in our unit, was into harder stuff. He was one of the few who knew of an opium den in the ville, a Vietnamese camptown, whose cardboard and flattened-beer can shanties began near the main gate on Highway One. I'm not sure when Billy started going there or how he found out about it, only that after a while I came to know that the

article
By RON RIDENHOUR

ville was where he always went.

At first he was getting a pass. But pretty soon the captain got wise that something weird was going on, and that was the end of Billy's passes. Fuck 'em, he told me the next day, and that night he was gone. Over the wire.

From then on Billy didn't need a pass. He just left when he felt like it and came back when he was ready.

Sometimes when he got back, he'd come and find me, usually in the unit's small, ammo-crate club. I'd be knocking down 3.2 beer and getting sick—it didn't take much of the half-formaldehyde swill to do it. Come on, man, Billy would say. Let's go sit on the beach and smoke a joint.

The beach at Chu Lai was magnificent then: a clean, white half-moon whose gentle crescent formed a broad, starlit arc on the edge of the South China Sea. Sitting there, facing the horizon, staring out into the eastern distance, dreaming of what we called "the world" that lay beyond it, we passed a smoke back and forth and watched the waves wash in. We'd talk about this and that. The war. Home. Our girlfriends. How the Army sucked. How Vietnam sucked. After a while, though, our conversation would always come back to the same subject. Suddenly it would just be there, the nightmare, Pinkville.

Billy had been at My Lai that day, along with Gruver and the rest of Charlie Company. For him, though, the dead from Pinkville had become his lifelong companions. On those evenings when we sat out there on the beach at Chu Lai, their ghosts always drifted in for a visit.

Billy used to look out across the water, hugging his knees. "All them people we killed, man," he would begin to say after a while, singing out to them over and over again, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of the waves. "All them people we killed."

Sometimes it takes forever for the perfectly obvious to crystallize in your mind. Slaughter was the name of our game in Vietnam. Even though I saw it happening all around me from the beginning, it took My Lai to make me understand what I was seeing.

By the time I got to Vietnam just before Christmas 1967, everybody was talking about killing gooks. Gooks this, gooks that. The gooks, the gooks, the gooks. At first there was some confusion. How did you tell gooks from the good Vietnamese, for instance? After a while it became clear. You didn't have to. That's what everybody said. "They're all VC when they're dead."

They were all gooks.

I had once overheard two sergeants talking about another massacre a few months before I learned about Pinkville.

"Jesus," one of them said after hearing the details from his friend, "how did you shoot women and kids?"

"Just closed my eyes and squeezed the trigger," said the other man.

I'd been seeing the little massacres right along, the murders of one, two, maybe three or four people at a time, ever since I'd gotten to Vietnam and started flying light air cover for grunt companies. Sometimes, standing on a chopper skid, flitting along 50 feet above a bunch of GIs, you'd see some grunt simply blow a peasant away. Blip-blip-blip. Like that. Nothing to it. One VC KIA, you'd hear the report come over the radio. Got us a gook, captain.

In five separate instances I saw with my own eyes, the offense of the newly dead was that the man happened to be home when the grunts arrived. Wasn't much more to it than that. He was Vietnamese. He was male. He was home. He was adios. Other times, we'd fly over moments after a U.S. Infantry company or Vietnamese patrol had blown holes in a bunch of civilians for no apparent reason. They'd be lying there, three, four, maybe as many as a half dozen, bleeding and dying, some piece or another of them flopping around in the road. If they had weapons, I never saw them. Travel was hazardous for civilians. Being alive was hazardous.

What was happening all around us in Vietnam was not a strategy that went awry, or one that had unforeseen and regrettable consequences for a few unfortunate civilians. It was one in which the deliberate military aim was to lay waste to the countryside.

Yes. Kill them all. Let God sort 'em out. The brass knew what they were doing. They knew what we were doing. We were doing what they wanted us to do. We were killing people, and, as we soon discovered, the brass didn't care who we killed, so long as there were a lot of them.

Every fifth round in my M-60 machine gun was a red-tipped tracer. When I pulled the trigger, it was like drawing a flaming orange line through the air, marking the hot, bucking edge of a jagged scalpel. That's what we used them for, to slice people into multiple parts. It's not like cutting up a chicken, of course. People come unglued from the business end of a gun in tiny little bits that splatter all over everything. Very messy.

Although I eventually transferred to the Americal Division LRRPs, I spent the first four months of my tour in Vietnam as a door gunner, standing on the skid of a helicopter as it whipped and twisted and turned just above the treetops and rice paddies, zooming over a hedgerow or tree line into a surprised village or placid paddy, searching for armed Vietnamese men to slice into bloody little guerrilla specks.

The ships we used in Primo, my chopper outfit, were those small police-like jobs with the Plexiglas bubbles and barely enough room for three people. In ours the pilot sat in the middle and the door gunners stood on either side, balancing M-60 machine guns and 200 rounds of ammunition, which were suspended from the top of the door frame with elastic bungee cords. Dressed in large armored ceramic bulletproof vests, flak jackets, fully hooded helmets, high boots and gloves, we must have appeared to the Vietnamese like men from Mars, descending from the sky in our clattering machines, noisy ray guns spitting red death.

We called ourselves hunter-killer teams, a term later softened to aeroscouts. We traveled in pairs, usually at first light or last light—sunup or sundown—looking for guerrillas on the move. Two choppers right on the deck. One ship always flew low, no more than 50 feet off the ground and usually lower, hopping hedges, offering itself as a target while the other ship flew above and a little behind the first, circling, keeping the lower bird covered. It may sound as if we had a lot of moxie to stand out there, swooping around, waiting to be shot at. But the truth was that any peasant revolutionaries who challenged us in small numbers were inviting death.

They did not call us hunter-killers for nothing. It was our game, even if it was their country.

When it happened, it happened quickly, in the blink of an eye. We would be zooming along, bobbing and weaving above the rice paddies, popping up suddenly over the tree line or a hedgerow, and there they were. Two, three, four—sometimes more—small men trapped in the open, with rifles in hand.

One morning, I remember, things did not go according to script. That day—it could have been the same morning that Charlie Company started work at My Lai—we found a lone guerrilla. Or perhaps I should say he found us. He was a small man, well hidden and dressed only in purple shorts and flip-flops, armed with an M-2 carbine and a handful of rounds. We had not

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seen him and there was no reason for him to think we had. Suddenly, though, there he was, rising from his hiding place, aiming his carbine and squeezing off rounds as if he thought himself to be invisible.

He had no chance, of course. I turned a hose of fire on him and in a split second the little man was awash in a hot metal wake of M-60 tracer rounds that ripped him open, his blood and his life rushing into the ground.

When we landed moments later and I scrambled out to snatch up his weapon, the second bird twirling in tight, clattering circles above us, he was already dead, little pieces of him splattered all over the carbine. Besides his shorts, the flip-flops and the weapon, he wore only a web belt and a two-day ration of rice wrapped in a scrap of plastic. I do not remember his face, except that it was gaunt, white as a ghost and belonged, I knew, to a hero. He had died taking a risk that seemed unnecessary for a cause I did not understand.

That was the day I began to realize we were in a war we could not win. Vietnam was full of these men—and they were almost all on the other side.

A few miles past where the first fingers of the mountains stretched east, our ships turned away from the valley floor, popped over a ridge and dropped into a small rice paddy nestled in a cup 200 feet below the hill's crest. We were out of the chopper in fewer than five seconds. Six figures in camouflage, boonie hats, grenade-laden web belts and full field packs, pounding heavily through thigh-high grass, lumbering with desperate urgency toward the relative safety of the jungle at the edge of the paddy. Both "sharks"—gunships—and trail ship circled once, and then the insertion bird lifted up to join them and all four peeled out back toward the sea. This was my first lurch patrol.

We set up an observation post maybe a mile away from the landing zone. Our job was to sit there for four days, maybe five, watch the trail, count the North Vietnamese soldiers who came down it and call in some artillery on them if we had the chance.

We rotated three two-man teams: one team watching the trail, one watching our back and one off duty. Silence was the rule, especially at night. During the day, though, everybody had something to read during breaks. I shared a book

called *The Passover Plot* with my buddy Mike, taking it in turns to read a chapter.

Mike was an intensely religious Mormon. He had been the state high school wrestling champ in his weight class and had gone on to a full college scholarship. Like me, he got drafted when his class load fell short of the minimum required to maintain a student deferment.

Mike was about 20, and I thought he was the closest thing to a morally pure human being I had ever known. He didn't cuss, lie, cheat, steal or speak badly of anyone. He was enough to make most people sick. He did, too—and he wasn't even that sanctimonious about it. Just sort of determinedly innocent. And Mormon. It eventually infuriated almost everyone. They hated him for his purity—that and the fact that he seemed determined to convert every soul he met to the buoyant, white optimism of the Church of Latter-day Saints.

So Mike the Mormon and I, the agnostic, spent all our off time that mission arguing in whispers about a book that cast Christ as a not-all-that-religious political revolutionary and the impact of that possibility on the faithful. I haven't the faintest recollection what either of us thought about any of it then, only that we sat in the scrub brush on the side of a hill in Vietnam for five days together, reading the book and occasionally arguing quietly about it.

What did it all mean, anyway?

Damned if I knew. I did know one thing, though: When we got off that hill, I was going to ask Mike about Pinkville. He'd been there that day with Calley and the rest of them.

Extraction choppers scooped us up with the last breath of daylight on the fifth day and took us to the nearest firebase, a primitive forward camp called LZ Ross that had been gouged into the mouth of the valley.

When we got there, two companies of grunts, filthy from battle and greasy with sweat and fear, were standing around in clumps, eating from field-kitchen trays, talking wearily. The NVA were dug in at the base of the mountains to the south. One company had walked into an ambush there. We shot the bull with the grunts, grabbed some chow from a field kitchen and decided to turn in.

All the inside space was taken, so Mike and I walked to the outer ring of bunkers near the perimeter, chose one that looked like it had a soft top, climbed up, spread our ponchos and poncho liners and lay down.

Off in the distance we could hear the

rumble of battle. Not far away a battery of 155s was belching artillery rounds into the night. But on top of that bunker it was cool, clear, relatively safe and you could see every star in the sky.

It was there that Mike told me what he and Billy did that day after they ate their lunch at My Lai.

Most of the killing was over at Pinkville when Mike and Billy stopped for lunch at the infamous ditch. This was where Calley supervised the machine-gunning of dozens of civilians.

Eating at that particular spot could not have been easy. The dead were everywhere. A relentless, sometimes piercing din arose from the ditch: It was the wailing and thrashing of the wounded and dying. Earlier, sometime between 9:00 and 9:30, after Charlie Company's first sweep through the hamlet, Lieutenant Calley had ordered his men to round up the rest of the living and bring them to the bank of the ditch. When dozens of people—some say as many as 200, nearly all of them women, children and old men—were herded into the ditch, Calley ordered his men to open fire. A few soldiers resisted the order, but there were plenty who did not.

It took Calley and two dozen grunts 15 minutes or so to gun down all the people assembled there. With that many people crowded together, however, it was difficult to be thorough. By the time Mike and Billy hunkered down an hour or so later with their C rations, the lieutenant and his triggermen had moved on. The undead in the ditch began to cry out, however, the limbs of many banging about spasmodically, the way those of the seriously wounded sometimes do. It would have been a terrible sound, all that flopping and slapping of flesh, the crying, all that agony out there in the morning sunshine.

At a certain point, after the pork and beans but before the peaches, Mike and Billy checked their M-16s and walked down the ditch, dividing up the survivors and finishing them off. Just the two of them, pacing deliberately along the death pit. There's one moving. Pow! There's another one. Pow! You take that one. Pow! They walked the ditch bank once, back and forth, and no one moved anymore.

Mike's story matched Billy's detail for detail, but hearing him tell it was different from hearing it from Billy.

Mike had been my closest friend in the service. We were drafted on the same day. Our backgrounds were similar, both working class, both athletes, both from the West. For whatever reason, we latched on to each other in basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas and stayed together all the way through advanced infantry training at Fort Ord and jump school at Fort Benning to jungle-warfare training

at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. We'd been apart only during the four months Mike spent in Lieutenant Calley's platoon in Charlie Company while I was a door gunner with Primo. When I transferred into the Americal Division's LRRP company in late April 1968, Mike had already been there several weeks, having transferred from Charlie Company a few days after My Lai.

Now, as we lay out under the stars at LZ Ross, there was a distance between us that hadn't been there before. Mike, Mike, I wanted to say, tell me it ain't so. But it was. Yes, yes, yes, he said on every detail. It was all true. Yes, he said, that's what we did, that's what happened.

"It was a Nazi kind of thing," he said.

We had been on the bunker for nearly an hour by then, face to face across a few feet of sandbags. We were both tired. It had been a long, nerve-racking five days on patrol and we had not gotten much sleep. A long silence hung between us after he finished telling his story.

"I dunno, man," he said finally. "It was just one of those things."

He rolled over and a few minutes later I could hear the rise and fall of his breath. He was asleep.

Second Surge sat atop a black granite crag overlooking the sea on the Chu Lai coastline like a monstrous crab. A huge Red Cross splashed over its roofs identified it as a hospital. The South China Sea was not far below, less than 200 feet, but the fall was almost straight down. A smooth rock shelf, 40 feet wide at low tide, lay at the bottom, making an inviting diving platform for those ignorant of the danger. A vicious riptide circled there, sometimes carrying away unwary enlisted men who sought to prove that they could swim against it.

The Americal Division Officers' Club shared the hospital's perch, lying opposite Second Surge across a wide, deep ravine that isolated it from the rest of the base camp. You could see the club members sitting up there on the veranda on late afternoons, sipping drinks and leaning back in their bamboo chairs under the palm thatch.

It was rumored that some officers used to lay bets on how many enlisted men would make it back to shore.

Nobody much liked officers in those days. There were exceptions, but most of us had personal lists of officers we would just as soon see killed. Better them, we thought, than the random Vietnamese who fell into our sights. Some people, especially those who were not there, may find that hard to understand, but it is true. The shorter you got, in fact, the more certain you were to have such a list—and the longer it was likely to be.

Michael Bernhardt had a long list by the time I found him in the waning days

of 1968. It started with Calley and ran all the way up the chain of command to Major General Samuel Koster, the two-star commander of the Americal Division.

But then Bernie, like many of us, had been through a lot of changes. Along with Billy, Mike and Gruver, he ended up in Charlie Company, in Calley's platoon. Unlike them, however, Bernie had flat out refused to take part in any killing at Pinkville. His reward, he later realized, was that Charlie Company's officers intended to keep him in the field until he was killed.

I'd been hearing the scuttlebutt for months that Bernie had been a refuser at Pinkville and I'd been looking for him ever since. But he was hard to find because he was always in the field. I knew by then that the story of the massacre was true. The problem was proving it.

I was sure that the Army would try to cover up any investigation. Would the men who told me what they saw and did say the same things to an official questioner? That was what I needed, someone to stand up and tell the truth. Maybe Bernhardt was my man.

I found Bernie at Second Surge two weeks before I was scheduled to go home. He was in bed, lying barechested in wrinkled blue hospital pajamas, both legs bandaged to the thigh, recovering from an extreme case of jungle rot. He was lucky to be there, he said, especially since jungle rot was not his only problem.

Bernie had been a known troublemaker in Charlie Company even before the massacre. Twice before Pinkville he had written to his congressman, complaining about the actions of the company's officers. In each case, word of the complaint—and who filed it—came down the chain of command.

Then, a few days after Pinkville, the officers started making Bernhardt walk point all the time. When S-2—intelligence—warned Captain Ernest Medina (the company commander) to watch out for an ambush, Bernhardt was made to walk on the ambush side of the formation. Then, when he started getting jungle rot with just four months to go on his tour, the officers wouldn't let him leave the field for treatment.

As time went by, the rot's bleeding open sores, giant strawberries that erupted spontaneously on the skin from the combination of dampness and the accumulation of filth and bacteria, started to work up his legs. He started to have trouble walking. Still, the commander of Charlie Company refused to send Bernhardt to the infirmary.

In the end, Bernie took care of the problem in his own way. Timing his escape during evening chow, just as the evening resupply chopper was cranking up to lift off, he dropped his rucksack and his weapon and threw himself aboard, leaping into its empty bay just as

the bird reached that instant when it hovers briefly, then lifts suddenly skyward, turns and sweeps off in a clattering rush.

When Bernhardt limped into the 11th Brigade infirmary 20 minutes later, the doctors were astonished at his condition. This should have been treated months ago, they said. What the hell was wrong with those officers in Charlie Company? Were they trying to get him killed?

Bernhardt knew something special was planned for Pinkville. Captain Medina made that clear the night before the operation. The village they were going into the next morning, Medina said, was base camp of a Viet Cong battalion. No one there would be an innocent civilian. Medina told his men that he wanted nothing left "standing, living or growing, not even a blade of grass." It would be their chance, the captain said, to avenge fallen comrades.

When the choppers began dumping Charlie Company on the outskirts of the village that morning, Bernhardt knelt on a dike. He waited there, pretending to be having trouble with his boots, passing the time until Medina arrived with the second wave. When Medina's bird landed, Bernhardt stalled a little longer and then trailed the company commander and his party throughout the village all morning long.

Whatever Medina had in mind that morning, Bernhardt intended to witness. What he saw was enough to convince him that the CO was almost literally up to his neck in blood in the massacre. As he later told investigators, at one point he saw Medina shoot a young girl and, turning to Bernie, "gave me a look, a dumb shit-eating grin."

That evening, Bernhardt was digging a foxhole when the captain stormed up to deliver a message. It would be a mistake, Medina warned him, to write his congressman about what he had seen that day. Did he understand?

Yeah, Bernhardt replied, he read the captain loud and clear.

And he didn't write his congressman about Pinkville, either. If he got out of Vietnam alive, though, Michael Bernhardt intended to deal with Medina and the other officers responsible for Pinkville in his own way.

"I've got a plan," he told me finally, after we had fenced for some time. "I'm gonna kill them all. I'll find out where they are after I'm out. I'm going to get a real good rifle. One with a scope. I'm going to hunt them down and kill them."

I asked him to wait, though I was sure he was only half serious. Let me try my plan first, I said. We'll string them up, I promised, with the system's own rope. Blow the whistle on them and get them tried as war criminals.

Bernie was skeptical. How? he asked. I didn't know. I only knew that before I could prod official investigators into action I needed someone who was there who could be counted on to tell the truth.

Would Bernie back me up?

You can count on it, he said. If I told the truth, so would he.

And when the time eventually came, he did, as did Mike and Billy and many others.

Twenty years passed before I met Hugh Thompson and Harry Stanley, two of the best-known heroes of My Lai. It was the fall of 1988, and *People* magazine had asked me to track them down for an interview to mark the anniversary of the 1969 investigation.

I found Harry Stanley in the back acre of a giant wholesale lumberyard on the outskirts of Biloxi, Mississippi, about an hour and a half east of New Orleans. I had called ahead to the yard, which was the only telephone number for Stanley I could get—it was in fact the only number he let anyone have. Like many Vietnam vets, Harry Stanley had no wish to share his private life with the outside world.

A yard worker led me through a maze of lumber sheds, dodging mud puddles and machinery until we emerged in an open lot where a crew of seven or eight bundled-up, tattered black men labored in the cold hard wind, methodically restacking lumber. One of them, a stocky man with a scarf around his neck and no front teeth, turned and looked. Harry Stanley. He said something to the men he was with and ambled toward us.

We wandered over to a scattered stack of lumber, found a perch with our backs to the chilling gusts and Harry began to talk about that morning at My Lai when the wind was hot and the world and everybody and everything in it seemed to be completely insane.

Calley's platoon, which included Stanley as well as Gruver, Billy and Mike, had scurried off the first wave of assault choppers. They formed a skirmish line and started to move toward the hamlets at roughly 7:30. No gunfire came from huts on the hamlet edge as they approached.

"Everybody there was supposed to have been some kind of Viet Cong," Stanley said. Captain Medina had told them the village was the headquarters for the 48th Viet Cong Main Force Battalion, the VC's most battle-hardened unit in that part of Vietnam. "He said we were supposed to wipe out the whole village."

When the platoon reached the village, however, "all we saw was people running. All old women, children, old men. No weapons, nobody shooting at us and stuff. It's obvious that what Medina was saying was not it. It's not happening

here. But it was just like nobody cared. They were still doing what they'd been ordered to do in the beginning."

The first person the platoon came to, a wispy-bearded old man in white, was shot by one of Stanley's buddies, who then slit the man's throat, dumped his body down a well and pitched a hand grenade in after it.

From that moment forward the men of Charlie Company began to "shoot everything that moved. People running. Cows. Everything," Stanley, who was carrying an M-60 machine gun, followed the others, refusing to fire, stunned at what was happening around him.

"I wasn't firing because I was waiting for some resistance," he remembered. "There was no resistance. There was no reason for me to shoot. It was just a bunch of bullshit craziness to me. I wasn't a murderer."

Calley's men reached the far side of the village around 9:00, leaving a trail of death in their wake. Before long the second and third platoons also reached the far side. Soon thereafter, according to Stanley and many others who later told their stories to Army investigators, Calley ordered the men of all three platoons to round up and bring all the surviving villagers to the ditch. Amazingly, according to Stanley and other witnesses, some 200 people had survived Charlie Company's initial sweep. They were marched over to the ditch in small groups within the next 30 to 45 minutes.

Then, Stanley said, Calley "turned to me and he wants me to set up my machine gun and shoot these people. I told him, 'Naw, I can't do that.' He said, 'I'm ordering you to do that.' I said, 'You can't order me to do that.'"

Calley repeated his command, this time screaming in Stanley's face, "I'm ordering you to do it!" and threatening him with a court-martial if he refused.

Stanley stood his ground. "I told him if he can do that and get away with it, that's fine with me."

Furious, Calley whirled, grabbed Private Paul Meadlo's M-16, stepped up nose to nose with Stanley and shoved the rifle into the machine gunner's stomach. Stanley, just as quickly, whipped out his .45-caliber pistol, cocked it and pushed it into Calley's guts.

Stanley's buddies, meanwhile, stood and watched the exchange, goggle-eyed.

"I guess they thought I'd gone crazy," he told me. "But I was dead serious about what I was saying and what it meant to me."

"My general thoughts about it were, I'm in Vietnam already and I'm gonna die here anyway. So, hey, if you're talking about shooting me, we might just as well shoot each other—know what I mean? As far as doing what you're talking about doing, I'm not going to do that because that's wrong to me. If we had been fired at by one person, anything, or if we had a sniper pinned down, maybe it would have been a whole lot different

in my mind. But as far as I could see, what they said was supposed to be happening there wasn't happening there."

That was Vietnam, all right.

Harry Stanley's simple assessment was a perfect metaphor for the war. In fact, his definition may be the only one with which all Vietnam veterans might agree. However you saw it, what the brass and the politicians said was supposed to be happening in Vietnam was indeed not happening there.

At My Lai—as elsewhere, unfortunately—such acts of principle as Harry Stanley's had little impact on the outcome. His defiance of Calley's orders aroused no mass resistance among his fellow GIs.

When he saw that Stanley wasn't bluffing, Calley, however, backed down. Returning Meadlo's M-16, the sputtering lieutenant ordered each squad leader in the company to choose "some shooters." The record shows that somewhere between 20 and 30 GIs, led by Calley, began pouring rifle and machine-gun fire into the ditch where the survivors of the initial sweep had been herded.

Hugh Thompson, another man who knew right from wrong at My Lai, still flew helicopters until a year ago. Instead of hunter-killer missions on the coastal plains of south central Vietnam, however, he ran oil-company choppers between Lafayette, Louisiana and oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

In 1968 he was a 25-year-old helicopter pilot at the Americal Division headquarters at Chu Lai. On March 16, Thompson, with his aeroscout team, flew to My Lai to provide air cover for what he expected to be a "standard insertion" of an infantry company.

What Thompson saw as he circled above the developing carnage that morning, however, "confused, bewildered, shocked and infuriated" him, he told me.

In the most famous of his several attempts to stop the slaughter, Thompson landed his helicopter between a bunker filled with cowering Vietnamese women and children and an advancing line of American soldiers led by an officer. Ordering his door gunner to take aim at the American ground troops and to shoot them if they opened fire on the people in the bunker, Thompson hurried over to the officer, who may have been Lieutenant Calley.

"Any way you can get those civilians out of the bunker?" Thompson asked the officer.

"Yeah," the officer told Thompson, "with a hand grenade." Angrily telling the officer to leave it to him, Thompson ran back to his helicopter and called in

one of his gunships to ferry the people to safety, a task that required two trips.

Would his door gunner actually have shot the other American soldiers?

"I don't know," Thompson said, "and I'm so glad I didn't have to find out."

Even before the confrontation at the bunker, he and his crew had spotted a wounded young woman writhing in the grass. Marking the spot with a yellow smoke grenade, Thompson radioed for someone on the ground to help her.

Moments later, he saw Captain Medina walk over to the young woman and nudge her with his boot. Then he took a step backward and coolly squeezed off a burst of M-16 fire, killing her instantly.

Some time that morning Thompson saw the results of Lieutenant Calley's work in the ditch, where, he estimated, there were 200 or more dead and wounded Vietnamese.

"It had a lot of bodies in it," Thompson said. "There was a black NCO and a lieutenant standing there. I set down, called the lieutenant over and said, 'Hey, there's some wounded people in this ditch. Can you help them out?' The statement was made, 'The only way I can help them out is out of their misery.' I said, 'Aw, come on, man. These people are hurting. They need our help.' I took it that he was joking. As I lifted off and started to turn I heard an M-60. My crew chief said, 'My God! He's firing into the ditch!'"

When Thompson was able to return to the site a short while later, one of his crewmen waded in among the dead and dying.

"A few minutes later," Thompson said, "he comes up. He has a little baby in his hands, blood all over it, but we couldn't see any wounds. No open flesh wounds or anything."

Thompson flew the infant to a nearby civilian hospital.

Later that day he met with his platoon leader to talk over the day's events. Backed by other pilots in his outfit, Thompson worked his way up the chain of command with a personal demand for a formal investigation. Unfortunately, he filed his complaint with Colonel Oran K. Henderson.

That was the last the pilot heard about the massacre until he was interviewed by Army investigators in the fall of 1969. His testimony against Captain Medina, along with Michael Bernhardt's, was the basis for the prosecution of Medina for the murder of the young woman Thompson marked with the smoke grenade.

Unlike Harry Stanley and the few others like him, Hugh Thompson's heroism at My Lai received official recognition. A few months after the trials, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his rescue of the women and children in the bunker at My Lai. It marked a sig-

nificant event in military history: A member of the U.S. Army had been decorated for battlefield bravery for facing down American soldiers.

Only after the investigators came to question him, however, did Thompson learn that his complaints to Colonel Henderson had gone nowhere. Henderson—commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade—had covered up what happened at My Lai, an act for which he was eventually court-martialed.

Hugh Thompson and I spent almost two days talking about My Lai and Vietnam. He made no bones about his view of events at Pinkville—that barbaric, horrifying slaughter, as he described it. But he refused to believe that other massacres happened elsewhere in Vietnam.

"That's not the American way and that's not the way things are supposed to be," he said. "That's what the Nazis did in World War Two. We're the guys in the white hats. We're supposed to be the good guys."

There was a reason Hugh Thompson's complaints to Colonel Henderson went nowhere. What happened at My Lai that day happened not because Captain Medina, Lieutenant Calley and the rest of the men in Charlie Company went crazy. Henderson, Medina and Calley were all following orders, executing a general policy designed at the divisional level. My Lai was one of many such massacres. That was the way we fought the war in Vietnam.

Thompson, in fact, had no need to tell Henderson of the massacre, the Army's official investigation later revealed, because the colonel already knew about it. Henderson circled over the village in his own helicopter much of the morning and saw the slaughter with his own eyes.

And Henderson was not alone. Samuel Koster, the commanding general of the Americal Division, had likewise circled over the dying village that morning with several members of Koster's executive staff. And they had done nothing. None of them—not Koster, not Henderson, not one senior officer—issued a single order to the men on the ground to stop murdering civilians.

I knew the moment I heard about My Lai that the blood on the hands of my friends was already dripping onto mine. A melodramatic reaction, maybe, but it was the way I felt—as if I had been contaminated by something of which I could never really be cleansed.

I felt obligated—people who knew me then would have said it was an obsession—to discover if Gruver's story was true and, if it was, to expose it and let the chips fall where they would. To my great sadness they fell all over Mike and Billy, as they fell on others.

In the end, in March 1969, three

months after my being separated from the Army, I wrote a letter to the president, Congress and the Army. The letter explained what I knew about the massacre and how I came to know it. What I hoped for was a complete and thorough congressional investigation.

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By and by, I returned to Southeast Asia and began my career as a journalist. I was there, in fact, covering the invasion of Laos for *Time* on the day in early 1971 when Lieutenant Calley was convicted for his role at My Lai. During the year following Calley's conviction, Captain Medina and then Colonel Henderson were tried for their roles at My Lai.

Both men were acquitted.

None of the other soldiers—officers or enlisted men—implicated in the case were found guilty.

Lieutenant Calley was the only American soldier convicted for crimes committed at My Lai. He was sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. Appeal followed appeal until the sentence was cut to ten years. Less than four years after the original sentence, Calley, a convicted mass murderer, was a free man.

Hugh Thompson was right. We were supposed to be the good guys. Almost everyone who went to the war wanted to believe that. Maybe we dreamed we would even come home heroes. Some did: Thompson, Harry Stanley, Michael Bernhardt. They were heroes, though it is unlikely they became heroic in the way they would have wished or may have envisioned in their daydreams.

In the Vietnam some people remember—Ollie North, Ronald Reagan and George Bush come to mind—Americans were heroes in chains, men who could have won the war given the chance and a free hand.

In the Vietnam that I knew, we did have a free hand and we used it with little mercy. To me, the heroes were almost all on the other side—and we were killing them.

Despite the valor of many, therefore, it seems to me that few Americans emerged from Vietnam as heroes. Instead, hamstrung by the memories of what they did and saw, many thousands of combat veterans, even those who were physically whole, came home emotionally and spiritually crippled.

Now, 25 years later, especially when the war drums begin to beat, I think of my friend Billy and all the Vietnam vets like him. How many thousands, I wonder, still hug their knees on the hidden beaches of their dreams, as they sing to themselves: "All them people we killed, man. All them people we killed."

